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AUTHOR	Allen, James E., Jr.
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Abstract

Educators are challenged to assume as an educational goal for the decade of the 1970's the assurance that no one shall leave school without the skill and the desire to read to the full limits of his capacity. An appeal for a total national commitment to this goal is made to all educational institutions, legislative bodies, and civic and industrial groups. Emphasis is placed on the fact that the potential social and cultural effects of accomplishing such a goal can strengthen every facet of American society. The role of the Federal Government in providing technical, administrative, and financial assistance is seen as supportive of the state and local boards who will plan and implement specific programs to effect the necessary educational system improvements. (CM)

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THE RIGHT TO READ -- TARGET FOR THE 70's*

Address by James E. Allen, Jr.
Assistant Secretary for Education
and
U.S. Commissioner of Education

Imagine, if you can, what your life would be like if you could not read, or if your reading skill were so meager as to limit you to the simplest of writings, and if for you the door to the whole world of knowledge and inspiration available through the printed word had never opened.

For more than a quarter of our population this is true. For them education, in a very important way, has been a failure, and they stand as a reproach to all of us who hold in our hands the shaping of the opportunity for education.

These individuals have been denied a right -- a right as fundamental as the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness -- the right to read.

The suppression of the individual which for so long characterized the governance of nations rested on the ignorance of the many and the learning of the few. With the invention of movable type there was created a source of widespread learning that held hope for the eventual abolishment of ignorance and for removal of the barrier to the participation of the common man in the determination of his destiny.

The education for all, necessary as a foundation of a democratic society, became a possibility, making feasible the quest for the realization of this concept which honors the dignity and worth of the individual.

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*Before the 1969 Annual Convention of the National Association of State Boards of Education, Century Plaza Hotel, Los Angeles, California, Tuesday, September 23, 1969, at 9:00 a.m.

Thus, from the beginning of our Nation, the importance of education has been recognized. Education has come to mean many things and to encompass a wide range of information and experiences, but certainly it must still include, as it did in the beginning, the ability to read.

Those who do not gain this ability in the course of their early education lack a skill necessary to all other areas of learning and are being denied a fundamental educational right -- the right to read.

It is true, of course, that the inability to read effectively is only one of the many vexing problems facing American education, just as heart disease and cancer represent only limited dimensions of our National health problems. Yet, we have seen the value of concentrating attention on such medical concerns.

The inability to read effectively, contaminating as it does every other dimension of education, is clearly one challenge deserving of our concentrated efforts. As we learn how to attack this deficiency co-operatively we will not only be getting at this foundation of learning, but will be gaining the strength and the skills to meet together many other educational problems.

From a variety of statistical information accumulated by the Office of Education regarding reading deficiencies throughout the country these shocking facts stand out:

- - One out of every four students nationwide has significant reading deficiencies.

- - In large city school systems up to half of the students read below expectation.

- - There are more than three million illiterates in our adult population.

- - About half of the unemployed youth, ages 16-21, are functionally illiterate.

- - Three-quarters of the juvenile offenders in New York City are two or more years retarded in reading.

- - In a recent U.S. Armed Forces program called Project 100,000, 68.2 percent of the young men fell below Grade Seven in reading and academic ability.

The tragedy of these statistics is that they represent a barrier to success that for many young adults produces the misery of a life marked by poverty, unemployment, alienation and, in many cases, crime.

It must be recognized also, however, that for the majority who do acquire the basic reading skills, there can also be a barrier which limits the fulfillment of their right to read. This barrier exists when the skill of reading is not accompanied by the desire to read. We fail, therefore, just as much in assuring the right to read when the desire is absent as when the skills are missing.

It is inexcusable that in this day when man has achieved such giant steps in the development of his potential, when many of his accomplishments approach the miraculous, there still should be those who cannot read.

While still in New York State, I had begun to develop plans for launching a Statewide, concentrated, attack on reading deficiencies. Now I have national responsibilities and my view of the educational scene from this level convinces me that there is no higher nationwide priority in the field of education than the provision of the right to read for all, and that the Office of Education and the Department of

Health, Education, and Welfare can do no greater service for the cause of education than to spearhead a nationwide attack to eliminate this failure of our education efforts.

Therefore, as U.S. Commissioner of Education, I am herewith proclaiming my belief that we should immediately set for ourselves the goal of assuring that by the end of the 1970's the right to read shall be a reality for all -- that no one shall be leaving our schools without the skill and the desire necessary to read to the full limits of his capability.

This is education's "moon" -- the target for the decade ahead. With the same zeal, dedication, perseverence, and concentration that made possible man's giant step of last July 20, this moon too can be reached.

While it is obviously impossible to expect that our target could encompass the complete elimination of the reading deficiencies of the out-of-school population also, this decade devoted to the improvement of reading should include a new and intensive attack in this area of need bringing to bear the kind of widespread concentration of effort and resources that will be given to in-school youth.

I have chosen to set forth this target at the meeting of the National Association of State Boards of Education because you bear the responsibility for shaping basic educational policies for the primary and secondary schools of our Nation. The responsibility for the provision of educational opportunity, traditionally and legally, rests with the States. The public education system of our Nation has

developed on the premise that education belongs to the people and its control shall be in the hands of lay boards. It is you, therefore, who have the original responsibility and authority, within the framework established by your respective legislatures, for the setting and enforcement of standards, and for the evaluation of performance. It is you also who must be accountable for your stewardship. You are at the center of any effort to raise the level of achievement in our educational system.

State boards are, of course, not alone in this responsibility, for it falls also upon all those who participate in the administration and operation of the educational enterprise. Therefore, in presenting the challenge of this target to you I am also presenting it to groups such as the Education Commission of the States, the Council of Chief State School Officers, State education departments, local school boards and their staffs, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers and their State and local affiliates, the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, students and their organizations -- indeed, to all individuals and organizations comprising the total educational endeavor of our Nation. Essential also, of course, will be the intensive participation of the colleges and universities and their schools of teacher education.

But to hit the target by the end of the 70's, to achieve a goal of such enormous dimensions, involvement will have to reach far beyond the forces of education.

Necessary will be committed participation and support of the Congress; State and local political leaders and legislative bodies;

business, industry and labor; civic and community groups; publishers; advertising organizations; television, radio and the press; research and scientific organizations; foundations; the entertainment industry; the sports world; and, perhaps most essential of all, the understanding and support of an enlightened and enthusiastic public. In other words, I am calling for a total national commitment to and involvement in the achievement of the "right to read" goal.

This is a proper goal for our society because it will not only correct the injustice done to individuals by the denial of their right to read, but it will also, because of its widespread social and cultural effect, benefit and strengthen the entire fabric of our society.

I hope that by this point in these remarks I have succeeded in arousing your enthusiasm, but I suspect that certain doubts as to the practicability of the timing and scope of the goal have also crept into your thinking. Indeed I can already hear the excuses, the expressions of fear and reservation, the "yes, buts" with which many will greet this challenge. To accept these is to continue the rationalization, the justifications for failure that for too long have persisted, demoralizing our will and generating a defeatist attitude.

Of course this goal cannot be easily attained. It will be far more difficult than the landing on the moon. But the time is right, I believe, to try, for so much is at stake and there are so many favorable auguries for success.

- - This is a time when we have accumulated an enormous amount of research and expertise in the field of reading. Few other areas of learning have been so thoroughly and widely studied. May I add here parenthetically, however, that we must avoid the danger of

allowing education's reading "moonshot" to become bogged down in debate over <u>methods</u> of the teaching of reading. It is the <u>goal</u> with which we must be concerned.

- - This is a time when science and technology have given us a whole new array of resources to apply to the solution of the reading problem.

- - This is a time when school boards and school administrators are less preoccupied than at any time since World War II with the pressing problems which have been created by ever-increasing student enrollment.

- - This is a time of growing understanding of the effects of environment and other factors on the ability to learn.

- - This is a time when preschool educational opportunities are being more generally incorporated into the public education system.

- - This is a time when new Federal legislation has provided increased funds for attacking problems such as that of the improvement of reading.

- - This is a time when there is a great latent readiness to support a program that holds promise for the improvement of reading. The concern of parents, public officials and the general citizenry about the effectiveness of the schools seems to find a focus in the problem of reading failures. The failure to teach everyone to read is a strong factor in the loss of full confidence in our schools that is finding expression in large numbers of defeated budgets and bond issues, in student and community unrest, and in the growing tendency to seek new instrumentalities for educational reform outside of the traditional system. This is in a sense a negative situation that needs only a believable expectation of success in solving the problem to transform it into a tremendous positive force. The relatively simple, universally understood objective, implicit in the "right to read" goal, standing out clearly amidst the confusions of the complexity of the educational endeavor of these days, can be the rallying point for the renewed confidence in our schools that will gather to them a new surge of enthusiastic public support.

The cumulative effect of the conjunction of so many positive factors at this particular time, can but serve to reduce doubts and to support that reasonable degree of assurance of success that mandates the attempt.

While the main task of carrying out the activities necessary to achieve the goal of the right to read for all by the end of the 70's will fall upon the States and localities, the Federal Government has a vital supportive role to play. It is not the role of the Federal Government to make specific plans, nor to prescribe the programs and methods to be used. The diverse needs and conditions of the various States and their communities require the flexibility of approach that our decentralized system makes possible. The main contribution that can be made at the Federal level will be the coordination of the effort, the marshalling of forces and resources on a nationwide basis and the provision of the technical, administrative and financial assistance required, all done in a spirit of total and fervent commitment.

Once more then, I proclaim my belief that it is possible for the 70's to be the decade in which the right to read becomes a reality for all, with no one leaving our schools lacking the skill and the desire necessary to read to the full limits of his capability -- and that it is our duty to set for ourselves this target.

The months immediately ahead should be a time of preparation in the hope that next summer will see the beginning of the countdown, with the launch scheduled for the opening of the 1970-71 school year.

I therefore call upon you to take upon yourselves the obligation of assuring that every child in your State will learn to read, and I

request that you begin immediately in your own State to consider how this goal can be achieved, to assemble resources, to plan, and to report back to me what actions you have taken under State leadership so that the school year 1969-70 can be recorded as the year when together we set in motion the Nation-wide effort that will erase this intolerable deficit in American education.

The Office of Education has already begun this kind of activity, and we shall be consulting with you and all other educational forces, as well as with representatives of the total national community, as to procedures.

The decade of the 70's will see the 200th anniversary of our Nation. A most appropriate celebration of that event -- a celebration that would honor the true spirit of the democratic concept, and recognize the fundamental importance ascribed to education from the beginning of our Nation, would be to secure for all of our citizens that right to read which so long ago made possible the feasibility of a democratic society and continues to undergird its strength.

Continuing toleration of the failure to give everyone the ability to read breaks faith with the commitment to equality of opportunity which is the foundation of our public education system. Having arrived at a time which holds forth the possibility of eliminating this failure we must, in all justice, seize the opportunity with the utmost vigor and determination.

Remarkable success has been achieved by our educational system, but so long as there is one boy or girl who leaves school unable to read to the full extent of his capability, we cannot escape the charge of failure in carrying out the responsibility entrusted to us.

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